

My big fat KABBALAH WEDDING

With her marriage plans threatening to send her over the edge, *Olivia Falcon* turned to a spiritual mentor to remind her of the real reason behind the ceremony

PHOTOGRAPHS *Ross Harvey*

A YEAR AGO I had an epiphany. I was neck deep in the insanity of planning my wedding blessing: a juggernaut of an affair, with a dress that came with its own 'handler', napkins embroidered with guests' names and the gospel choir from the movie *Love Actually*. I was also frantically working to pay a skyscraper pile of wedding bills, while also looking after my two daughters, then both under the age of two.

It was during a rant about the napkins that my husband Peter suggested I take a break from 'the wedding crap' and focus on the more spiritual nature of our union. We were officially married with a couple of friends as witnesses in October 2010, when I was five months pregnant. It was a lovely day, but I craved the big dress, the big cake and a chance to celebrate with all our friends and family. Peter suggested we think about a Kabbalah blessing (Kabbalah was a spiritual not religious practice, he explained, although it had been studied historically by Jewish elders). Peter is Jewish, which put paid to the idea of a Christian service. I grew up in a very relaxed Christian household with church only at Easter and Christmas. And despite the warm joviality and

allure of a traditional Jewish ceremony – the kind that Cameron Diaz and rocker Benji Madden recently opted for – a Hebrew-heavy service felt too foreign to me.

Peter had experience of Kabbalah: in 2009, a year before we met, he had been invited by a friend to attend a ten-week course at the Kabbalah Centre in London. He credited this with teaching him patience and empathy and had often raved to me about Marcus Weston, the young, dynamic Kabbalah Centre leader. Marcus, 42, had left his 'soulless' career as an investment banker 16 years earlier to study with Kabbalah's modern founder, rabbi Philip Berg, in Los Angeles, and in 2008 became the leader of the London Kabbalah Centre. As Kabbalah was a form of spiritual teaching that could sit happily alongside any faith or none, Peter thought it would be the perfect bridge between our two religions. He was probably also horrified at the idea of spending the rest of his life with the woman who raged about hand-stitched napkins.

'I think Kabbalah might chill you out a bit in general,' he said. I kind of saw his point.

And so with nine months to go before our wedding blessing and with a healthy dose of scepticism, I signed up for Kabbalah 1, the same course that Peter had followed – a ten-week programme of informal one-hour lectures. I ►





Olivia and Peter
at their Kabbalah
marriage blessing at
Syon Park in London



Olivia and Peter with daughters Grace and Georgia-Mae. Left: with Kabbalah mentor Marcus Weston



◀ had read the stories about how Madonna had single-handedly turned Kabbalah into a celebrity cult (in 2010, the *LA Times* estimated her donations at nearly £7 million); I had watched a BBC documentary exposing the London Centre's aggressive fundraising strategies (Marcus admits they made a few mistakes early on), and I was riveted by Ashton Kutcher and Demi Moore's Kabbalah wedding and subsequent divorce (maybe not such a great endorsement for marital bliss). If they were after money they were out of luck as I had just given everything I had to the wedding planners. Peter often talked about Kabbalah but I noticed that he hadn't been back since finishing his course. Kabbalah seemed irrelevant, plus no one was into it any more, right? Wrong.

When I walked into the stately town house on Stratford Place (off Oxford Street), with its opulent feel, the classroom – which back in the day must have been the ballroom – was packed with 150 eager faces. Frazzled suits, an oligarch's wife, a confident kid with a rap-star swagger, a football club owner and a famous violinist. Wise faces, sad faces, pretty faces and – surprise – a few faces that I recognised. There on my table was Sam Pemberton, a PR guru who had once represented many of London's hottest nightclubs. She looked weary; she was here to find a new path after coming out of a toxic relationship and hoped Kabbalah would stop her

repeating the same mistakes. There was also celebrity hairdresser Errol Douglas whom I knew from my work as a beauty journalist, and a fabulously camp sales assistant from my favourite make-up counter at Selfridges. People sat at tables of ten, governed by a mentor (volunteers who have spent years studying Kabbalah). Coincidentally, my mentor Jay was the husband of another friend, the A-list facialist Anastasia Achilleos. Everyone seemed connected. And this is where I had the

first realisation: far from being a celebrity fad that had fallen by the wayside, Kabbalah is hot, and far more popular now than it has ever been. How exactly did this happen?

In 2000, a group of prominent businessmen hired a classroom in Regent's University in London and invited Eliyahu Yardeni, a teacher from the Kabbalah Centre in Paris, to talk to them every week. They held open courses on Sunday evenings on 'the

power of Kabbalah', where themes of spiritual development and self-awareness chimed with the booming self-help movement. Slowly the numbers doubled, and doubled again. In 2002, thanks to hundreds of donations from the most ardent Kabbalah students, the current Stratford Place HQ (estimated purchase price £3.5 million) was acquired. The current footfall of 1,000 students a week means that building work on a huge glass extension, which will double the centre's capacity, is slated to begin this autumn. Classes – free or

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moderately priced at £7 – cover topics such as health, relationships, business and leadership. There are mystical classes on astrology, reincarnation and meditation, plus sessions on ancient texts.

As well as teaching courses, Marcus (who takes no salary from the centre) now coaches many CEOs of *Fortune* 500 companies, galvanising their teams with his ego-busting Kabbalah Business Gym programme, which aims to restore core spiritual values to corporate life. Head of the European Stock Exchange Edward Fitzpatrick recently credited Marcus, and Kabbalah, with helping him transform his leadership style.

My experience of Kabbalah was that of a deep mental detox. It focuses on letting go of your ego – pride, anger, hatred – and all the negative emotions that serve us so little, and listening more to your soul. It asks you to address all the behaviour that lands you in trouble, messes up relationships and holds you back at home and at work, and brings about a sense of self-awareness.

I quickly became aware that I was carrying around a great deal of anger. I would explode



when I was particularly tired or stressed and rage at those closest to me. Anger and frustration were common themes for others in the class too, with many finding the frantic pace of urban life unbearable. People admitted to road rage, verbally abusing partners, shouting at their children and losing their temper with work colleagues. At the end of every class Marcus gave us all homework. The first task was to become more aware of our ego via a simple mindfulness exercise (called the 'proactive formula') whenever emotions threatened to spiral out of control. The idea is to pause when negative feelings bubble up and see that your reaction to the situation – not the situation itself – is the real enemy. When you are more aware of your ego you are better able to head off a negative knee-jerk reaction. Through this realisation you have lightened up the situation – you have let in some spiritual light. You learn to smile instead of shout. You make a choice not to get angry.

Practising the proactive formula at home was a challenge, particularly when I came home to find a small person had smeared food over my bedroom floor. My usual reaction would be to scream blue

murder but instead I found myself, cleaning fluid in hand, calmly mopping up without the drama. My relationship with my husband and children noticeably improved. When I stopped shouting, they started listening. I started to feel far more peaceful and less angry. In fact, I found it hard to remember what I was so angry about in the first place.

I also began to address my strained relationship with my mother. Since my teens we had fallen into the habit of winding each other up over the smallest things. We were judgmental and critical of each other. She's a neat freak and the smallest crumb can set her off. I, for my part, can be brusque and demanding, expecting her to drop everything to help me out at a moment's notice (we sound charming, don't we?). I was hanging on to the belief that it was my mum's responsibility as the parent to reach out first and sort the situation out. The Kabbalah course showed me that it was my ego (my pride and fear) that was holding me back. It showed me that we are responsible for our own actions. In the most awkward exercise of the course, I was asked to call my mother, tell her I was doing a Kabbalah

course and ask her to list all the things she didn't like about me. I was not allowed to interject or respond but I had to write down all the points she made and then politely hang up. Mum was in heaven. I found it very difficult to get her off the phone. She listed the points above and added a few others into the mix: self-righteousness and bossiness were top of her list. Despite wanting to rip the wretched piece of paper up and default to my habitual anger and resentment, I had to tuck the list away safely and read it three days later with a cool head. Looking at this character assassination in black and white, I began to understand that she might have a point. I started to become acutely aware of all my ego-driven foibles and worked hard at becoming a little more humble. For the first time, I started to build a 360-degree picture of myself. Kabbalah had unblinkered me.

A few days later I called my mother back and we began to talk. I told her how I wanted to make a positive change in our relationship. I was surprised by how quickly she started agreeing rather than responding with her usual negativity and I gradually began to feel closer to her. We ►



WHAT IS KABBALAH?

■ **Kabbalah (meaning 'to receive')** is a practical system of ideas and insights designed to help individuals gain more from life. It is based on teachings taken from the Zohar, an ancient script said by Kabbalists to be 2,000 years old and written by Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, rediscovered in Spain in the 13th century by Rabbi Moses de León. The Zohar is a commentary on the Jewish Torah, explaining it as a universal set of spiritual principles.

■ **The London Kabbalah Centre** is a registered charity and has 350 outreach volunteers who work with charities such as Barnados and St Mark's Children's Home in London, making sandwiches for the Salvation Army and providing gift packages of books, toys, chocolates and clothes for 2,000 homeless and underprivileged children and families

■ **Kabbalah's global HQ** is in LA and there are 40 centres, from Moscow to Rio.

■ **Sir Isaac Newton** wrote more on Kabbalah and mysticism than he did on science. His copy of Zohar is archived at Cambridge University.

■ **Some followers** wear red wristbands to ward off negativity.

■ **Karen Berg** is the spiritual leader of the Kabbalah Centres worldwide. She took over in 2004 after the death of her husband Philip Berg, a former Orthodox rabbi and businessman who, in 1965, founded the modern Kabbalah movement. The Bergs are spiritual Marmite – critics question their authority while followers believe they are a force for good.

◀ still have moments where we feel frustrated with each other but, post-Kabbalah, we have a far less fractured and more loving dynamic.

I also notice a positive difference in those around me. My friend the writer Anna Pasternak, who also took Kabbalah 1, seems far more relaxed too. She had been in a power struggle with her husband Andrew over his weight and was very critical of his diet. Since Kabbalah she has stopped making pointed comments and has found that once the pressure – and the nagging – subsided, Andrew lost weight by himself.

Anastasia Achilleos, who has studied Kabbalah for ten years, tells me that the difference between religion and Kabbalah is that 'religion separates people, while spirituality does not. My husband is Turkish Cypriot and I am Greek Cypriot, and there is often finger-pointing and hatred around that because of the history of division on the island of Cyprus. Kabbalah has given me a place where I can raise my children with spiritual values and help them become the best versions of themselves. Yes, they will be taught and immersed in both of our cultures, but they understand that we are all connected. Kabbalah is not religious, it is the foundation of how to live a conscious life.'

Other friends were intrigued about what I had been doing every Thursday night for the past year. I went on to take Kabbalah 2 and Kabbalah 3,

which went deeper into teaching how to remove negativity from your life (I never felt compelled to wear the red wristband, which is a symbol of keeping negativity at bay). More often than not, when I say the word Kabbalah, people frown or glaze over; but there have been a few who have gamely signed up and are now passing the baton themselves. I try to practise the principles of

mindfulness daily and go to the centre off and on, sometimes with my husband, to chat with Marcus or have dinner with him. I feel the most amazing positive, welcoming energy whenever I walk into the centre.

Our marriage blessing was a triumph. Although the setting was very traditional, Marcus's Kabbalah blessing was slightly more alternative to the usual Christian or Jewish service. Marcus talked about the meaning of a soulmate, about having the

capacity to love on days when you feel nothing but hate; he got people thinking about their relationships and the bigger picture of their lives and moved the most surprising people to tears. Despite all the expensive frills I had fussed and fretted over; the highlight of the day – and the thing our guests commented on most – was the warmth, sincerity and beauty of Marcus's blessing. And this is for me the essence of Kabbalah – it doesn't preach about how you should live your life but teaches you how to lift your life. ❏

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Kabbalah's famous followers

- Madonna ■ Donna Karan ■ Ariana Grande ■ Demi Moore ■ Guy Ritchie ■ Britney Spears
- Gwyneth Paltrow ■ Roseanne Barr ■ Ashton Kutcher ■ Geri Halliwell ■ Sandra Bernhard
- Paris Hilton ■ Mila Kunis

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